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A Question of Hotels

Brad and I were driving north one cool day in October, 1873. We had left the C. & N. W. Railway in the morning with Webster City as our objective, expecting to reach there by nightfall. There was a stage line running from Boone to Webster City, crossing the Boone River on the old bridge north of Hook's Point. At the bridge was an old hotel, not much patronized owing to its unsavory record. It was understood that there was a better sample of a hotel at the next stopping place on the north and south trail. The place in question was Homer, a small burg ten miles south and a little west of Webster City.

At Mineral Ridge and Hook's Point we had sold some fine bills of goods and as a consequence were much delayed. Another thing tending to relieve us of time was the inclination to shoot game occasionally. Of this there was an abundance and we often stopped and shot a half dozen prairie chickens or ducks and took them to the next town for the hotel people to prepare for our next meal.

On the afternoon in question we killed some chickens, threw them into the wagon, and continued on to Homer. It was quite dark when we drove into "town" and as we moved to the front

of the building, designated as a "hotel," our hearts sank within us. It was a frame building two stories high, unpainted, no porch, no veranda, the "office" door, opening from the ground level, was in the middle of the edifice with two windows on each side. There were five windows in the second story. There was no sign of life, no light, no sound or indication of a place of abode. I dismounted and, followed by the dog, "Dan," slowly opened and entered the door. Finding myself in a long, empty, dingy, dark hallway, I opened the first door I could find at my left. It was another dark, empty square room. The creators of this architectural design had evidently intended this room as an office. It was bare of any kind of furniture.

Passing on down the hallway we found other empty rooms, two or three on either side of the hall. Into each room the dog would nose his way and, smelling around hastily, would skip out, thus signifying his knowledge that the room was vacant. Finally, after reaching the farthest part of the building, (we must have gone sixty or seventy feet), a door was opened that revealed the welcome sight of a woman preparing supper. Filled with smoke and a greasy smell, the revelation was not an unpleasant one—considering the long day's journey, the tired and hungry travelers, the cold, and the lateness of the hour. The dubious prospect of a night's lodging made any indication of food and rest a most pleasant sight. With sleep-

ing outdoors on the prairie as an alternative, one would take up with almost anything that promised fire, food, and shelter.

"Is this a hotel, madam?"

"Yes; will yer dorg bite?"

"No'm he won't bite. Where's the landlord?"

"Wal, he's 'round here som'ers, I reckon."

"I have a man and team with me and would like to stop overnight if you have the conveniences to entertain us."

"We ain't much on the entertain, but we'll do the best we can with the provisions we've got. Say, mister, is that your dorg?"

"Yes, madam, that is my dog. If you will tell me where I can find the boss of this ranch, I'll hunt him up and arrange for the night."

"My old man, if that's what you mean, is out lookin' for the keow, but he ain't the boss yet by a long shot. I run this shop and if you stop yer, I'm the duck that gets the pay and don't forget that part, young feller."

"Have you a barn attached to the hotel?"

"We've a barn, but it hain't 'tached to nothin', much less'n the tavern. Here's a dip if ye want ter put up your team," and she handed me a dirty excuse for a lantern. Finding my way out, I piloted Brad and the team to a low shed where shelter and "entertainment" for the team were found. I held the light until the team and wagon was disposed of, then we repaired to the hotel.

"Madam, how far is it to Webster City?"

"'Bout twenty miles in daylight, nigh on to thirty in the dark, like 'tis t'night."

"Is this the only place to stop this side of the city?"

"Oh, no, there's lots o' places to stop, mostly out o'doors though."

"Can you cook some chicken for supper?"

"Kin I cook 'em? Ye just try me and see."

We brought out the birds and sat in grim silence. I tried to read a newspaper by the light of a miserable tallow dip and Brad got a full understanding of the situation while the cook was getting our supper. We had chicken for supper and plenty of it. Brad found a string in the gravy and forever afterwards insisted the fowls were fried in candles and that the string was a part of the wick. I am not so sure of this but I would not dispute him as he had some pretty good evidence on his side. About the time we began to eat, the landlord (the husband of the "boss") came in; having completed his chores, he seated himself by the stove and lighting a big pipe soon filled the room with the strongest of plug tobacco smoke.

"Jim, get a move on ye and fetch a bucket o' water," said the boss. Jim moved and brought the water. His wife liked the dog and took pains to feed him bountifully of the food left from our repast. At bedtime we were shown to a room on the ground floor furnished very scantily, no carpet,



Captain K. W. Brown is pictured with sword, belt and sash given him by his company he personally had enlisted.



K. W. Brown, age 24 years.



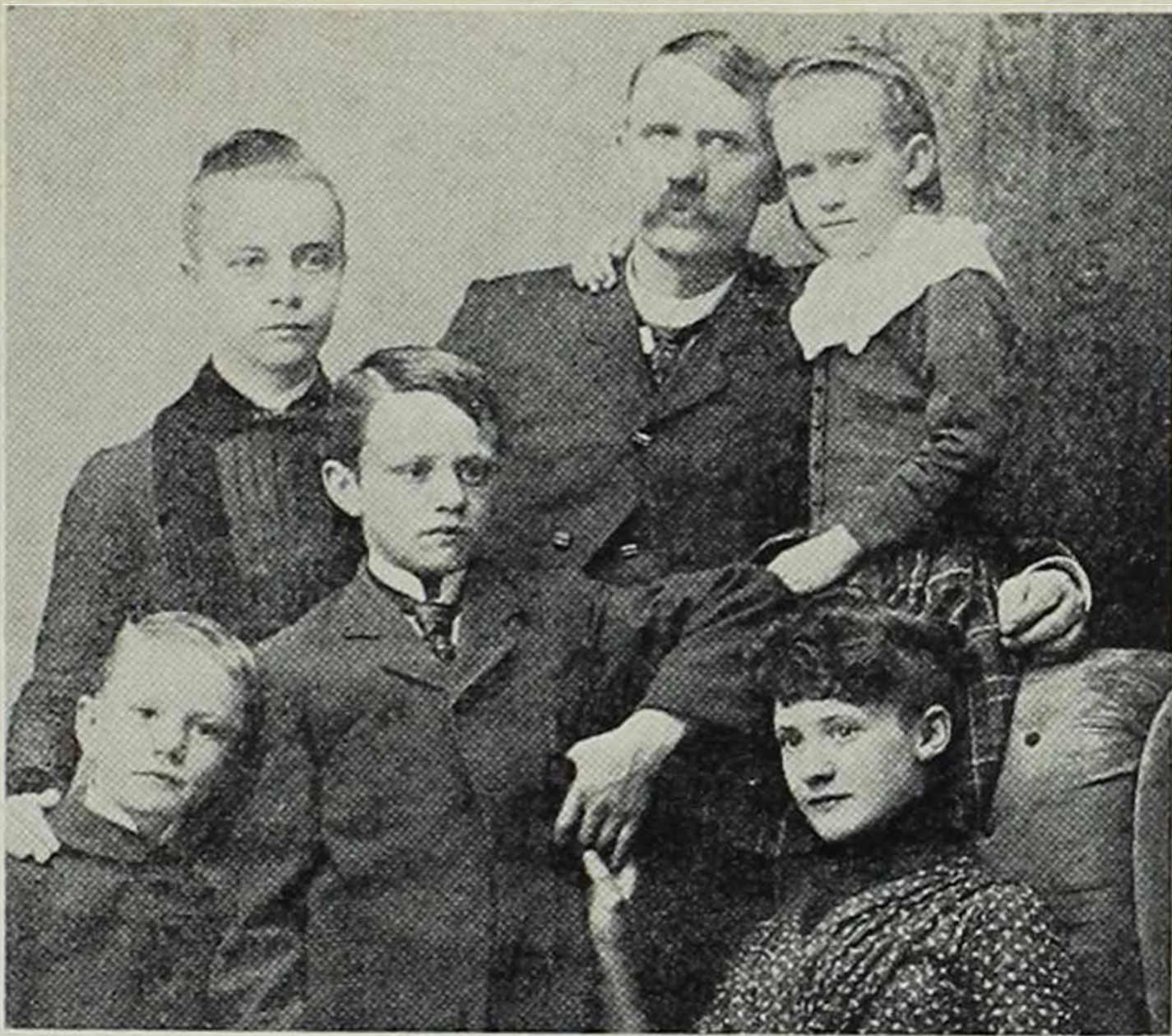
K. W. Brown, the second Mrs. Brown, and a baby out for a ride.



The Brown family shortly before the death of Lydia Gates Brown in 1885.



Lydia Gates and Kendrick W. Brown were married September 7, 1866, and left immediately for Ames, Iowa.



The Brown family with its new mama, Maggie B. Mitchell.
The Captain and Miss Mitchell were married March 2, 1886.



The Captain and his second wife.

Price Fifty Cents.

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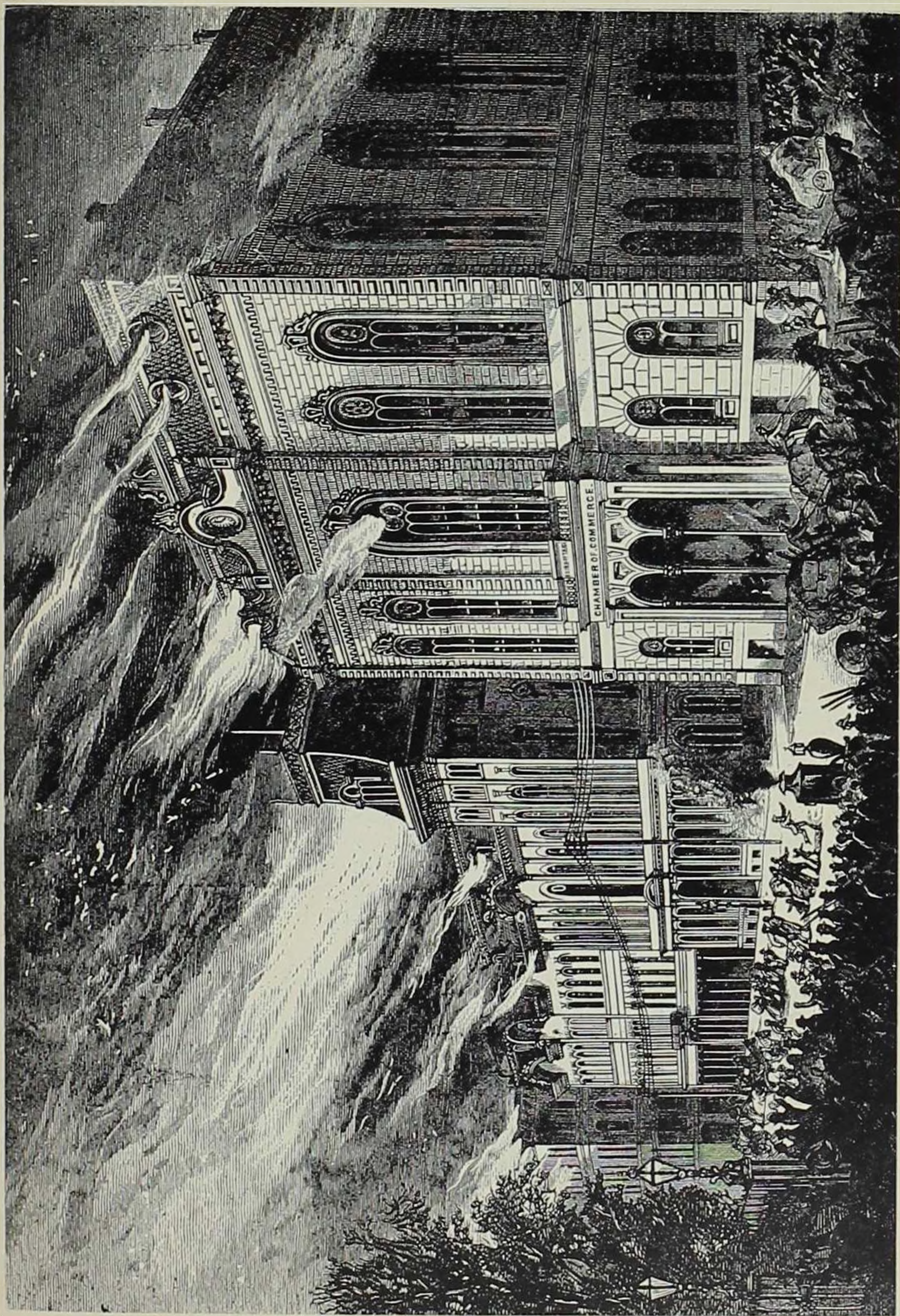
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The book that made Captain K. W. Brown a "Knight of the Grip."



The Chicago Chamber of Commerce building burns during the Great Chicago Fire of 1871.

TYPICAL IOWA MAIN STREET . . .



Main Street looking East, Marshalltown.

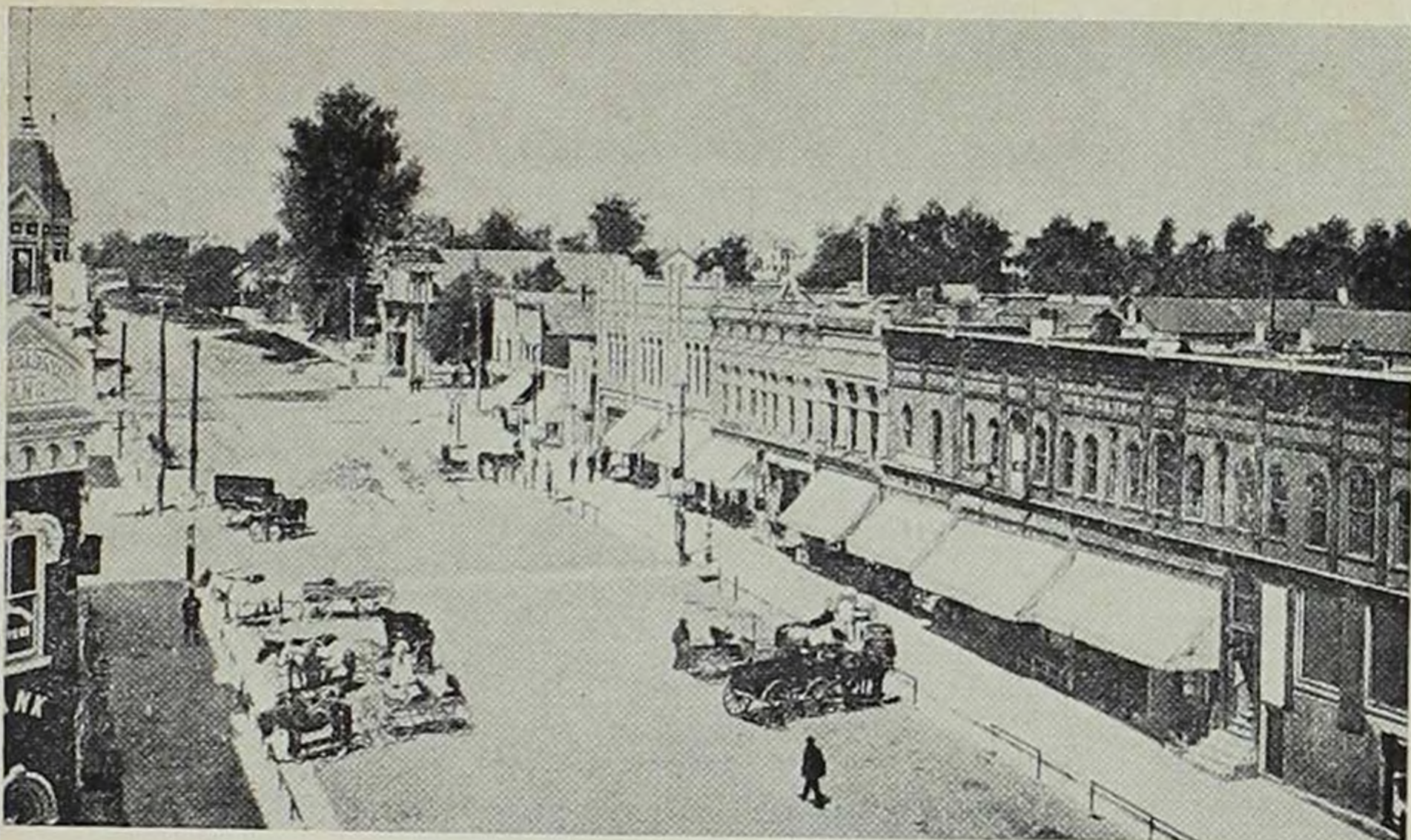


Lombard Street, Clarence.

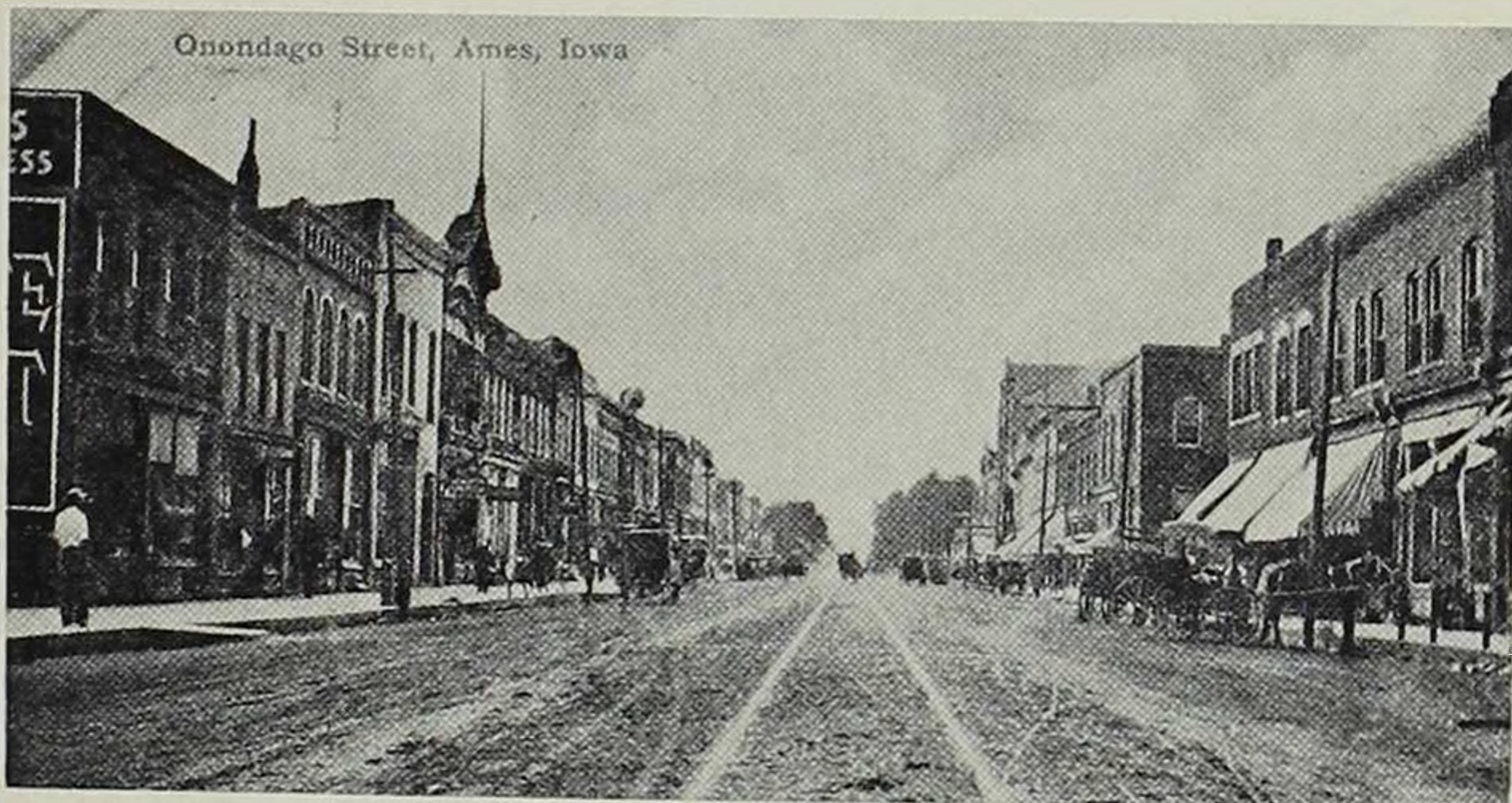


North Side of the Square, Harlan.

AS SEEN BY KENDRICK BROWN



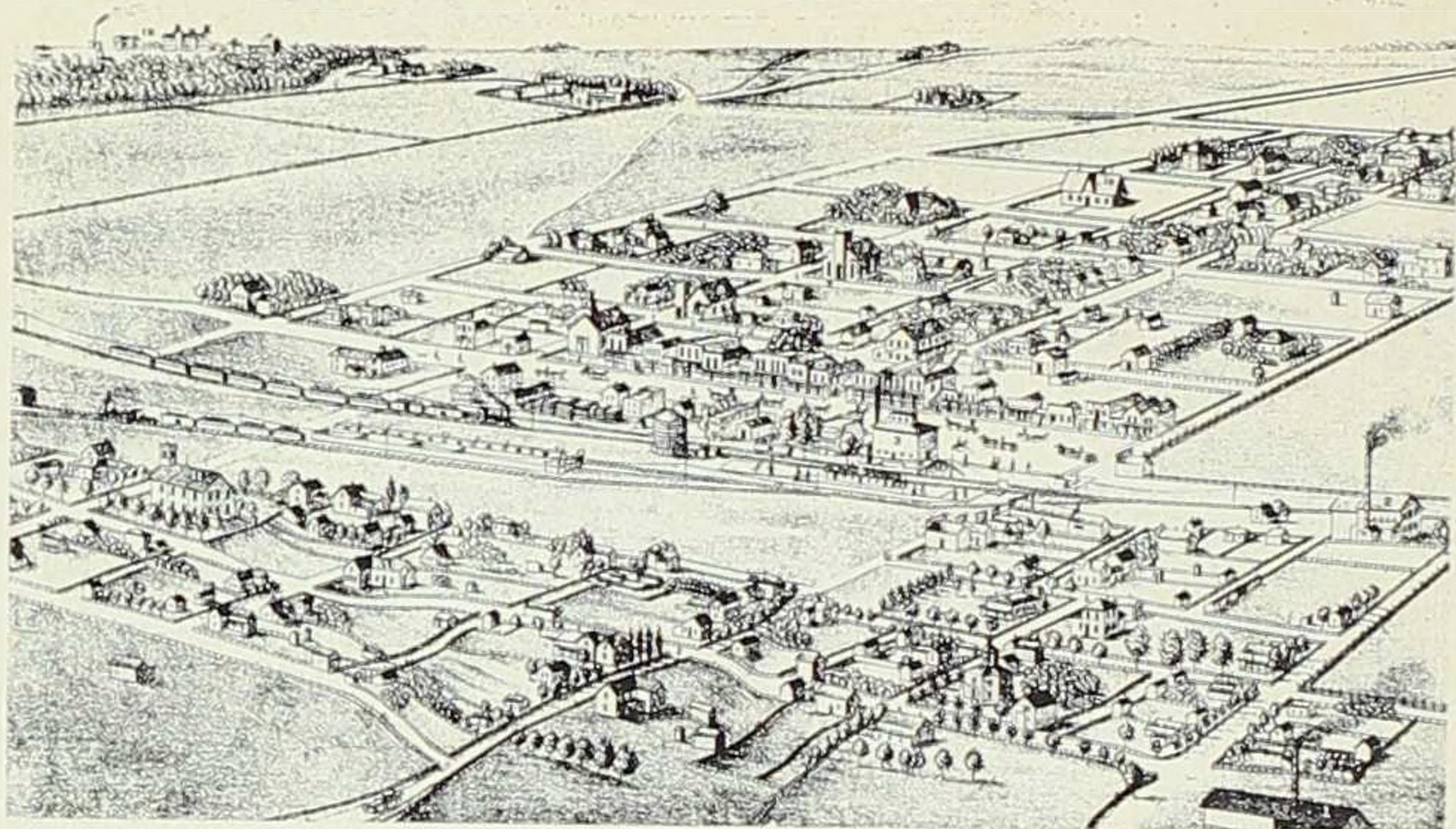
Main Street, Denison.



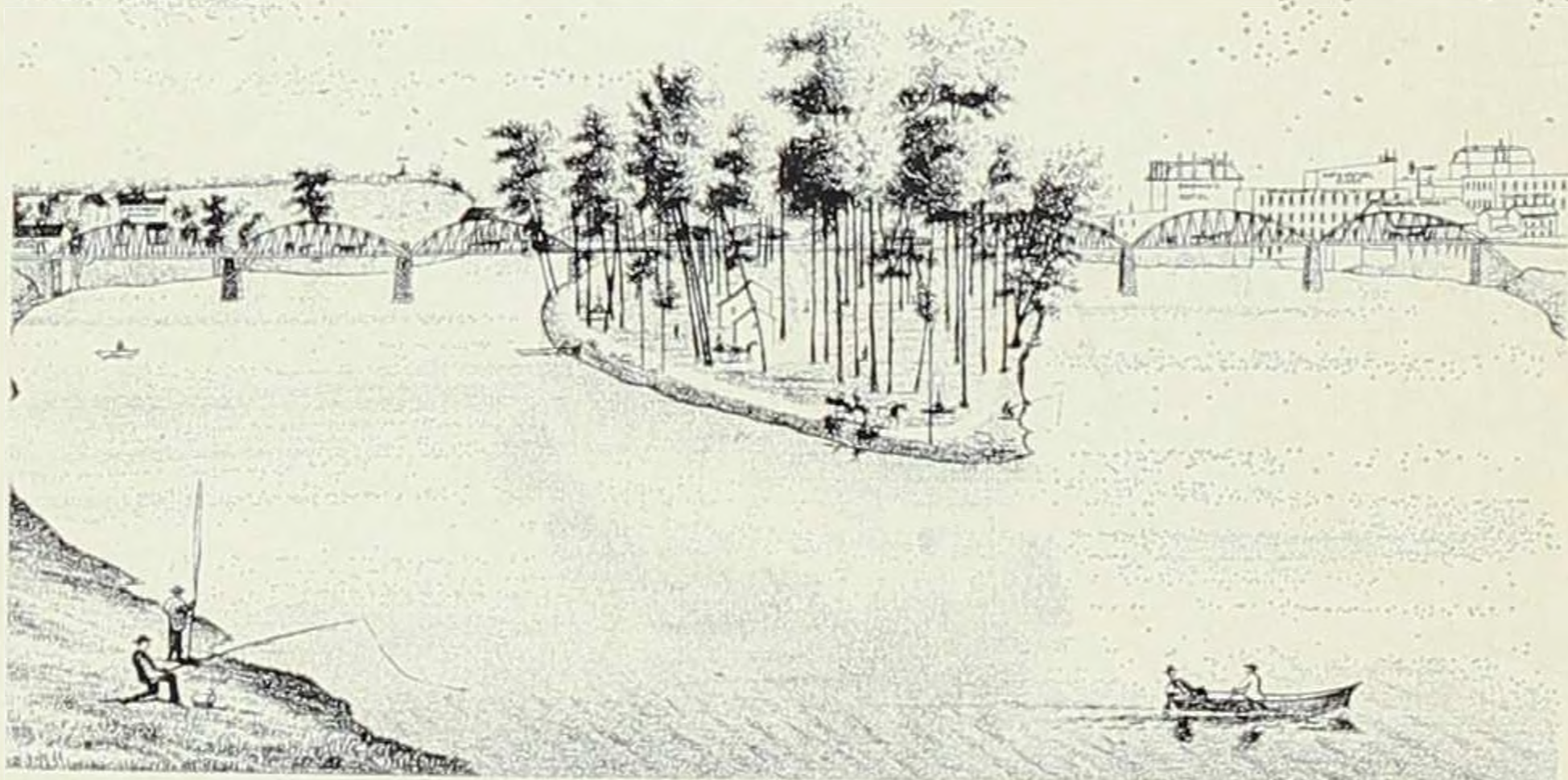
Onondago Street, Ames.



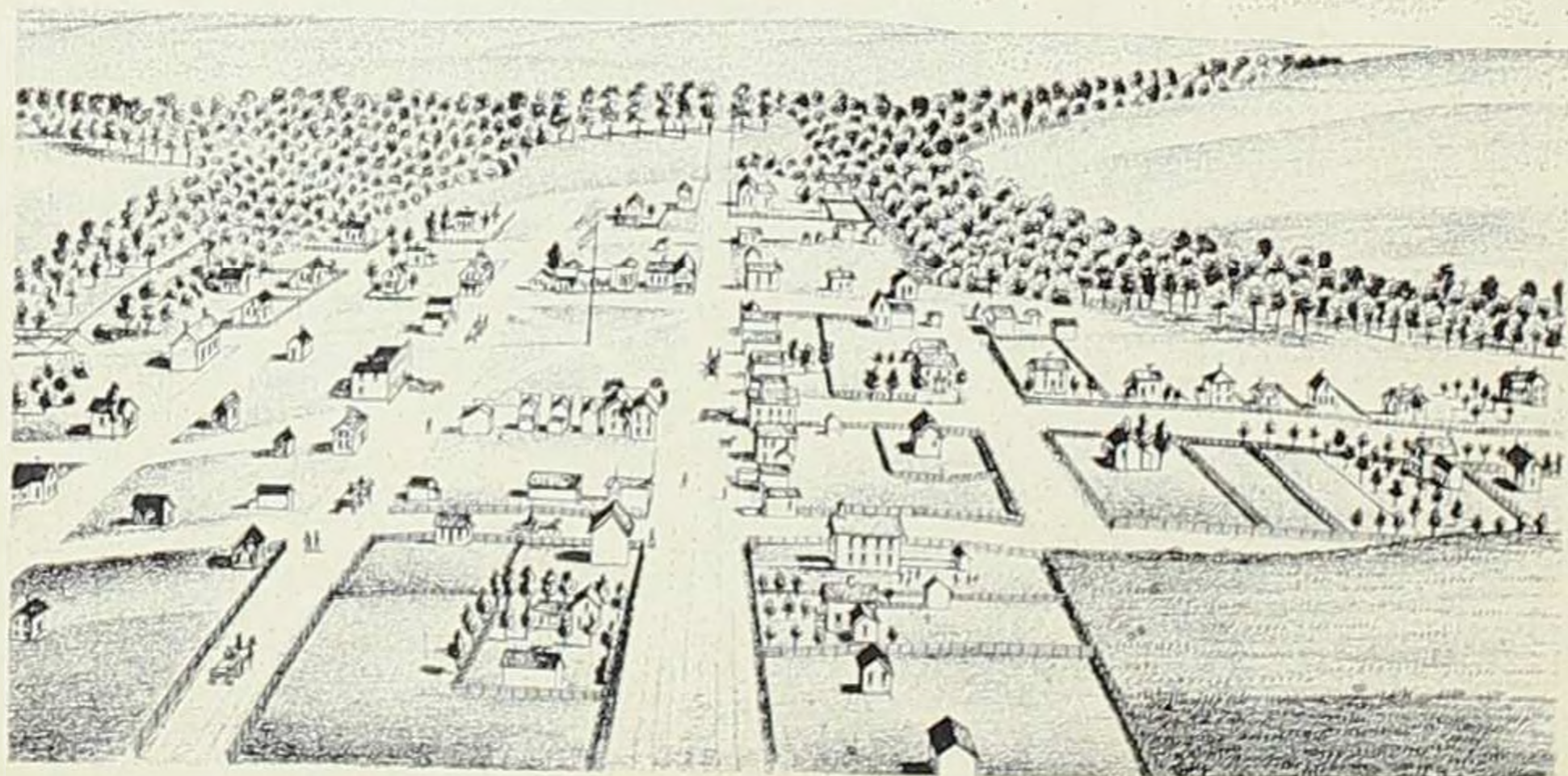
East Side Story Street, Boone.



Ames as pictured in Andreas' 1875 Atlas.



Cedar Rapids. Brown's Hotel is in the background, to the right of May Island.



Exira was still a small village as pictured by Andreas in 1875.

washstand, or chair; the beds were dirty, the sheets were grey with use, and the pillow cases the same. Putting our lap robes on the bed for sheets and letting them extend over the pillows we slept comparatively well. In the morning, prompted by a spirit of mischief (for which I now make no kind of an excuse) I took a lead pencil from my pocket (having blue lead in one end and red lead in the other) and turning up the clothing from the foot of the bed wrote in blue these words: "Slept in these sheets, June 16, 1873," and turning the pencil and writing with the red lead directly underneath: "And again—same sheets—October 16, 1873; four months in use."

For breakfast we had the remains of the chicken supper. They had no butter and the bread was sour and no good. We got away as soon as possible and for many days were regaled by Brad's stories of chicken fried in candles and the "epitaph" on the dirty hotel sheets.

Some Tough Hotel Guests

In the summer of 1873 I became convinced that the most rapid means of travel, and making the most towns for me, was to hire a team and driver by the month. In this way I could keep the team with me and go from one town to another by rail when convenient and drive the team to the next town when not, thus saving an immense amount of time. My driver was a young man, "Brad"

Palmatier, a most kindhearted fellow who was with me for two years (four seasons) and for whom I entertained a warm personal friendship. He was a neighbor and from the first entered into the spirit of the enterprise with a zeal that was only equaled by my own. His team was well-matched and good travelers. His three-spring wagon was suited to the business, and his Parker breech-loading gun and liver-colored bird dog made our equipment complete.

Brad knew how to keep his mouth shut when he was standing by and seeing me sell goods. He neither condemned nor commended. He kept still. We used to have some peculiar experiences in the hotel line in those early days in Iowa. A good hotel was a rarity. The coziness in some hotels, so prevalent in our state today, was sadly wanting in many towns. The native "sodcorn" jayhawker was as apt to keep a "tavern" as anyone; the main issue was the collection of the "fees."

We left Harlan one morning quite early and drove across the country to the new town of Exira. It was about thirty miles. Here we got dinner, sold a bill of goods, and then took another drive of about thirty miles to Coon Rapids. Here we could find no place to stay overnight and were compelled to push on to old Carrolltown, about ten miles further. Here we found ample accommodations (?). The hotel was open (both doors and windows). It was a cold, raw day in October and

visions of a hot fire and comfortable entertainment had encouraged us the last twenty or thirty miles of the tedious journey. The house was boarded up and down and consisted of three rooms: the office, sitting room, parlor, drawing room, and reception room was one; the kitchen, dining room, and cook room was another one, the same size in the rear as the front. A "lean-to," built on the north side of the main room, was where distinguished guests were permitted to retire on special occasions. The family and hired help slept on the floor in the kitchen. On our arrival I began negotiations for the "bridal chamber." Whether it was my well-known (?) good looks or the evidences of wealth we displayed in our "turn out" I am unable to say, but the room at once was placed at our disposal. To say that it was an elegant apartment would not tell the tale. It was superb. There was a high post bedstead of seasoned maple and a cotton bedcord. On the bedstead was a tick of deep and wide dimensions. One dirty and soiled sheet was all the linen the room could boast. The pillows were made of husks and therefore did not need any superfluous covering. The floor was minus a carpet—a good thing because there were so many wide cracks in the floor that a carpet would have sagged into each crack and made it look bad. The wardrobe, dresser, and commode were in the store yet. The chairs were difficult of access as they were needed

in the dining room at mealtime, in the "office" the rest of the time, and there were only six all told. The shortage was made up by using a plank six or eight feet long when there were more guests than the usual "straggler." After supper we had a hard time with the "crowd," consisting of the landlord, his hired boy, Brad, and the writer. We adjourned to the first room referred to and were joined by three cowboys who wanted to stay all night. Permission was granted and they were given the floor of the "front room." They were pretty tough appearing fellows.

We had thrown our lap and buffalo robes on the floor of the "office" and our dog, "Dan," was lying on them. He was a good-natured animal and a good judge of human nature. He was not inclined to bite but insisted upon gentle treatment. He *could* be ferocious. The first thing the ruffians did to manifest a disposition to quarrel was to take a seat by the fire and demand of me, in an insulting manner, that I treat everybody alike by passing around the cigars. (They saw me hand one to Brad.) I looked unconcernedly into the eye of my interrogator as he repeated his question, "Ain't ye goin' ter set 'm up?" I made no reply as I puffed my cigar. I was leaning back in my chair and was very comfortable. He was somewhat nonplussed by my manner as I wished him to be and, turning his eyes toward the dog on the pile of blankets, he seemed to discover an

escape for his malignity. Springing toward the dog he grasped the robes and, with a sudden jerk, pulled them out from under the dog in an instant. The beast struck the floor on his back, bounded like a rubber ball, and was at the throat of the ruffian. He did not make a sound and the action was so sudden and unexpected that man and dog fell backward into Brad's lap. Knowing the habits and disposition of his dog so well, Brad caught him by the neck and, speaking sharply, succeeded in quieting the combatants.

Turning to the discomfited cowboy, Brad said, "Now, my boy, the next time you interfere with this dog, you can fight your own battles." This battle ended with an oath and a muttered threat.

When we retired it was discovered that the door to the room had no fastening. The only way we could keep out intruders was to move the bedstead against the door. This we did and retired. The dog slept in the room with us. He was a good watcher. Along in the middle of the night the growling of the dog awoke us. The "tallow dip" had long since gone out and the dim light of the stars made little headway through the dirt begrimed window pane. The dog became still. The thumb latch, moving up and down, was the only sound we could hear. It was repeated a good many times and the door was pushed with considerable force without effect because the heavy bedstead was planted against it.

Brad's gun was at the head of the bed. My revolver was in my pocket. Brad slept on the front side. My coat hung on the bedpost. Brad carefully picked the pistol from my pocket and aiming it high enough, over the door, to do no harm, fired. There was a shuffling of feet, whether two or more we could not tell, and all was still. The rest of the night we were undisturbed. In the morning the "toughs" were up and off before us. They evidently concluded the combination of men, animals, and battery was too much for them.

The Worst Hotel I Ever Saw

We only stopped for dinner. It was a beautiful day in the early fall of '74. Brad and I, the team, dog, and gun were all subjected to the dinner. I have since been to the town a good many times and never could I find a man or woman that knew for certain who it was that kept the Guthrie Center Hotel that season. There were only three or four business houses in the "burg" and I got through with my work in a hurry. Driving to the hotel we found a long, lank specimen of a man sitting in the doorway whittling.

"Halloo, boss! Is this a hotel?"

He looked up with a sort of tired expression on his face, looked us over carefully and drawled:

"Mister, ye must be a stranger yere; this is the only tavern any w're's 'bout these diggin'," and he whittled as if it was for wages.

"Is it about noon?"

"I 'low grub's all ready."

"Can we get some dinner?"

"Ye kin if it ain't all gone 'fore ye set to."

"Do you have feed for our team?"

"Plenty of feed." But he never moved.

"Where is the barn?"

"Just 'round the corner."

I dismounted and, *stepping over the landlord*, entered the house. The door was open and the warm sun shone in and made it look cheerful. The sunlight was the only thing in the room except an old saddle; this lay on the floor and I sat down on it; not a thing on the floor or on the wall. As soon as Brad put up the team he joined me in the office.

"Old man," said Brad, "where are all o' the chairs?"

"Thar all in to dinner jist now. I generally have a bench, but the boys tuk it up to a dance las' night and we're a little short as a consequence."

"Couldn't turn over and let a fellow sit on you, could you?"

The lazy lout turned around and looked at Brad inquiringly a moment but said nothing. There was no place for us to wash. The "proprietor" looked as if he had never washed. We had to feed our team. They were well-cared for and could rest.

"How long have you kept a hotel?"

"Not long."

"Do you expect to make it a business?"

"I 'lowed to when I started in but it kind o' goes agin me."

"I'm surprised to hear you say that. You ought to go to a big town and keep a big house and then people would appreciate you."

He smiled a sickly smile and said nothing but whittled vigorously.

A fat woman, who would weigh about four hundred pounds, came to the door and called out, "You'ns can come to dinner if ye want any."

We went through a terribly dirty room where our fat woman and her duplicate were washing. The foul odor of the room permeated the whole house and filled the dining room with sickening steam and the atmosphere of soapsuds. The duplicate came in to serve our dinner. Sour, stale bread; strong and furry butter; cold beef steak, warmed over; cold sliced potatoes, one-half warm and one-half cold, and the tallow in which they were fried not one-half melted; bitter, black coffee; blue milk; etc. I could not eat. Turning to the duplicate, I said:

"My dear, can I have a glass of milk?"

"I reckon ye kin," and she rolled off into the other room, soon returning with a glass of milk, her forefinger sticking into the milk up to the first joint. She set it down by my plate and snapped the milk from her finger with the ease of long practice and the greatest familiarity. I picked it

up and set it down as far from me as I could and groaned, "Oh, Brad, this is terrible."

She looked at me in sympathy and said:

"What ails ye?"

"I am sick."

"That's too bad. Can I do anything for ye?"

"Yes, get me a boiled egg."

She got it. I ate it. It was all I ate. The dishes were so dirty I could not eat from them, even if the food had been passable. Dirt was thick around the handles of the creamer. It looked like the dirt found under the fingernails of a farm boy in the potato field. I took some butter from the plate to use with my egg and picked three hairs from the small portion on my plate. This was too much. I turned to the duplicate again:

"My dear, is the lady in?"

"The which?"

"The landlady, your mother."

"I reckon."

"Can I see her?"

"I reckon," and she rolled off into the other room after her mother. This dining room girl is worthy of a word of description. She will serve as a model for hotel girls for all time to come. Allow me to give her dimensions. As near as I can remember she was about four and one-half feet high by three and one-half feet wide; her sleeves were rolled to her elbows; and she was barefooted. Her feet were the color of the ground but her

hands were clean to her wrists. The latter phenomenon was doubtless attributable to the fact that she had just left the wash tub. She soon returned with her mother who said:

"Which of us you'ns fellows want?"

"Madam, do you have any baldheaded butter?"

"I don't know what you'ns mean."

"You know what a baldheaded man is, don't you?"

"It's a man that has no har on the top o' his head."

"Well, that is the kind of butter we want."

"That's the best we'uns have got anyhow," and she was good natured at that. They seemed to have no conception of the situation. Both landlady and duplicate paddled out of the room.

When we were ready to leave and I asked for my bill, the landlord said, "A dollar." I told him to charge all he wanted for my man and the team, but nothing for me as I had nothing.

"Oh, well, it's a dollar just the same," was his indifferent reply. The above is as correct as memory serves me in describing the worst hotel I ever saw.

K. W. BROWN